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Platform politics: Party organisation in the digital age

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Abstract. This article examines the interaction of organisational and technological changes adopted by parties to respond to members' demands for more participation. We develop a term, *platform politics*, and create a framework for identifying how parties use platforms to open or close intra-party decision-making. The framework is then applied to two institutionalised parties (*PSOE* and *PD*) and to two movement-based parties (*Podemos* and *M5S*) of the changing party systems of Spain and Italy. We conclude that the tensions between existing organisational structures and the use of internet-based platforms create a series of unintended consequences for parties, which result in potentially disruptive outcomes.

Keywords: Party organization, party politics, online platforms, platform politics, representation, movement-based parties

1. Introduction

Western European party systems have recently had to deal with the consequences of latent political resentment, new social cleavages and disenchantment with political institutions. All these factors have bolstered a wave of strong electoral performances across the political spectrum by new parties, to the detriment of institutionalized parties. This wave has notoriously included movement-parties,¹ such as the Spanish *Podemos*, the Italian *Five Star Movement (M5S)*, and the Greek *SYRIZA*. This transformation has been paralleled by the emergence and consolidation of online platforms offering parties the opportunity to rearrange their relationship with members and the electorate.

Although these online platforms represent a promising tool for parties to improve representation and decentralise internal party governance, they put participatory pressure on parties with hierarchical structures (Gustafsson, 2012, p. 1,123; Esteve del Valle & Borge, 2013; Esteve Del Valle & Borge, 2018) and blur their classic strategy based on a sharp differentiation between party members and the public at large (Margetts, 2001; Löfgren, 2003). In response, parties offer organisational resistance to decentralising power and are diffident about relying on incipient technologies to adopt intra-party decisions (Esteve Del Valle, 2015; Borge & Esteve Del Valle, 2017).

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¹Movement-parties present similarities to traditional political parties – given their links to the institutional political arena and their participation in the electoral competition – and to social movements – given their organisational structure and repertoire of action (Kitschelt, 2006).

Parties are political actors with primary goals (Harmel & Janda, 1994) and organisational characteristics, which behave strategically to win elections and influence policies. To this aim, they can use online platforms, yet this use can put a strain on those parties' organisations. While many political parties seem to have adopted at least some online tools, the implications of the relationship between party organisations and the type of online platforms they have adopted are still unclear. In this article, we are interested in understanding the role played by technology in the organisational transformation of political parties at different levels of institutionalisation, and more specifically, the consequences of the use of online platforms by two institutionalised parties and two movement-parties from Southern Europe.

To this end, we develop a term, *platform politics*, and use it to describe how parties use online platforms to facilitate members' participation. Our analysis builds on previous research that examines how the design of online platforms reflects political values like decentralization of political power (Deseriis, 2017). We develop an analytical framework for studying the relationship of parties' organisational features and online platforms, stemming from a broader discussion of the crisis of representation, parties' new approaches to rank-and-file engagement, and technological solutionism (Morozov, 2013).

Our paper is organized as follows. First, we briefly examine the literature to explore the organisational models of political parties that have been proposed to address the crisis of representation, with an emphasis on stratarchy as a modern, more flexible kind of structure.

Second, we look at how political parties have been collectively involved in the diffusion of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and have established an online presence. We contend that parties might claim that their online presence makes them closer to the electorate, but attempts to disintermediate decision-making often fall short of creating real responsiveness and participation.

Third, to set up the stage for interpreting the interactions between the organisational and technological side of the transformation, we introduce the concept of *platform politics*. We explain how institutionalised parties can incorporate online platforms strategically to meet their organisational needs and decentralize intra-party power. On the other side, movement-parties use platforms to sustain their popularity and uphold their claims to represent the people.

Fourth, we explain the methodology of our research, rooted in a document analysis we have conducted to give meaning to parties' use of online platforms.

Fifth, we examine two institutionalised parties of the centre-left (*PSOE* and *PD*) and two movement-parties (*Podemos* and *M5S*) from Spain and Italy, to illustrate how *platform politics* plays out in different organisational conditions. Importantly, we argue that a series of unintended consequences for political parties appear as they adopt new forms of organisation and communication, leading to challenges that need to be addressed in order not to damage consensus. In particular, movement-parties tend to fall into a series of contradictions as they institutionalise, while the crisis of institutionalised parties has certainly not been solved through an inconsistent online presence.

Last, we conclude our study with a series of questions aimed at outlining a research agenda that will be able to further evaluate the consequences stemming from our analytical framework and its empirical application.

2. The transformation of modern political parties

During the past five decades, political parties have gone through a slow crisis, testified by the weakening of traditional partisan attachments, the fall of party membership, and an increased volatility of the electorate. Given how established mass parties adopt catch-all strategies (Kirchheimer, 1966) to expand their appeal to larger segments of the electorate, the importance of ideology and party members fades.

In Western Europe this has then resulted in the creation of *cartel* parties (Katz & Mair, 1995): reacting to the weakening of their social links, parties developed a closer relationship with the state, to the point of owing their survival to public finance from taxpayers, rather than to ideological representation and membership dues, and policy evaluation becomes the main electoral issue.

Some parties responded to electoral volatility by strengthening and isolating their internal organization from the electorate (Dalton, 2000); others tried to fix the trust deficit by opening internal decision-making (Ignazi, 2014). Most of these experiments have had a narrow scope, as the opening of party decision-making from a closed group of leaders to ordinary citizens poses a double principal-agent problem (Katz, 2014). It is hard to act on behalf of the traditional supporters while also opening to a broader spectrum of voters; many parties delegate some functions to an internal democratic process, while restricting most other decisions to party leaders.

Alternatively, for Enyedi (2014) the representational challenge should be framed as an identity problem. Conceding decisional authority to new constituencies can weaken the party brand, producing an ideologically inconsistent party facing uncertain electoral prospects, where ideologically-sound local candidates must follow a broad and vague party agenda to preserve internal unity. In turn, neglecting the ideological preferences of core constituencies undermines their confidence in the party, and weakens partisan identification.

In the following subsections, we explore two types of strategies adopted by political parties in the wake of this transformation, as an attempt to offer solutions of organisational and technological nature.

2.1. The organisational response: The emergence of stratararchy

In response to the pressure to create internal democracy, Carty (2004) suggests that parties have transitioned to a new organisational model, the *franchise* model, which depicts party organisation as resembling a fast food chain that decentralizes some decision-making to allow for regional variations in member affiliation, candidate selection, and policy agendas. This model is based on Eldersveld's (1964) idea of *stratararchy*, where different organisations within the party (e.g. central leadership, parliamentary party, party in the electorate. . .) are hierarchically ranked, but can follow their own logic, with a certain degree of independence.

Stratarchies can become more inclusive organisations than hierarchical parties, but broadening their electoral appeal can mean ordinary party members have more influence over strategy and personnel decisions than party activists (Carty, 2004). Bolleyer (2012) further discusses stratararchy as the intermediate point between two more traditional organisational forms for political parties: hierarchy, describing a top-down party structure, and federation, a decentralized configuration preserving the autonomy of different components of the party. She depicts stratararchy as the result of different strategic imperatives for the actors involved, with the leadership attempting to exercise control, and local branches trying to gain autonomy. Importantly, and in contrast with the rigidity of the old institutionalised mass party model, this elaboration portrays parties as flexible organisations, able to incorporate new structural elements, including online platforms.

We argue that party stratarchies can arise from the metamorphosis of institutionalised political parties that try to reframe their internal power relationships, but also of more modern movement-parties that start as loose federations and institutionalise over time. Notice that the adoption of stratararchy does not force institutionalised parties to become more democratic, because the components of a party do not necessarily communicate, and the influence of the local party can be contained by leaders. The result is that many sceptical voters express frustration with superficial changes to party organisation by indicating low levels of trust in political parties (Dalton & Weldon, 2005).

2.2. The technological response: The party goes online

The crisis of representation in political parties took an unexpected turn with the advent of the Internet, and the consequent opening of new opportunities for internal communications. Gibson and Ward (1999) were among the first to observe that most parties developed internal networks for computer-based communication. They discovered that while parties were very sanguine about the deliberation possibilities offered by ICTs, from the onset they used these technologies for coordination and information rather than for organizational restructuring and debate.

This view was soon counterbalanced by Hellen Margetts (2001) who by coining the concept of *Cyber Party* opened the door for a more optimistic stance on parties' use of ICTs aiming to (a) democratize parties' decisions; (b) promote new lax and informal interrelation networks; and (c) offer new possibilities of fundraising. A step in this direction was taken by Heidar and Saglie (2003) with their conceptualization of parties as *networks*. They argued that the Internet had the power to decentralize parties' organizations into networks more open to members' demands, to lobbies and to experts on public policies.

In terms of participation and mobilization, results of early research showed a limited use of ICTs by party members. Pedersen and Saglie (2005) showed how only one in three Norwegian and Danish party members visited party websites. These authors even predicted a sharp division among active and passive members and argued that this tendency could empower party elites. In brief, instead of increasing collective participation in parties' decisions, ICTs seemed to facilitate the "spiral of demobilization" (Vissers, 2009).

In the light of these findings, some contend that internet-based participatory experiments rooted in technologists' strong beliefs in the emancipatory nature of online communication are a form of *technological solutionism* (Morozov, 2013). Political leaders view technological fixes for social and political problems as preferable to changes in internal policy, but since citizens with higher socio-economic status have more time and informational resources to respond, online measures of public opinion can often be biased (Rendueles & Sola, 2015).

Lastly, in spite of its uncertain effects in terms of internal democratization, the technological revolution has been affected by existing party organization. Concerning the relation between parties' characteristics and their online behavior, Padró-Solanet and Cardenal (2008), Padró-Solanet (2009), Cardenal (2011) and Esteve Del Valle and Borge (2013, 2015, 2017) showed that in Catalonia and Spain, parties' organizational characteristics and their position in the electoral market influenced the participatory channels offered on their websites. Furthermore, they discovered that large parties, especially when at the opposition, tended to open more communication and participation channels on their websites (Cardenal, 2011, p. 95).

3. Platform politics

In the previous section we have introduced the technological and organisational aspects of the transformation of political parties. Now we propose to combine and observe them in their interaction, by introducing the innovative concept of *platform politics*.

In our conceptualization we draw from O'Reilly's (2011) observation that today, government should be conceptualized as a platform when it is obliged to address the complexity of aggregating public opinion data from a network of participants in a way that reflects their preferences. Although political parties interact with their members in a way that is different from how citizens interact with the state, in the internet era the problem of aggregation of public opinion is ubiquitous, and it has pushed parties towards

the adoption of online platforms. Specifically, we argue that political parties are using online platforms in an effort to reimagine interactions with their members and address the crisis of representation.

Figuratively, a platform is the foundation of an action or event forming the basis for further achievement (OED, 2017), and therefore in computer science, it has come to indicate an infrastructure that supports the design and use of applications, including hardware, operating systems, and mobile devices. Coupled with the architectural definition of a platform as a raised, horizontal surface, we see a platform as a “place or opportunity for public discussion” (MWD, 2017). On the other side, in politics, a platform is associated with the issues a candidate or party endorses, especially in the context of electoral campaigns.

While in politics the term platform is normally used to indicate a specific set of policies, that is not the meaning we intend to convey. Our usage of the term points to its figurative and technological meanings, as we see online platforms more as a container, a structure, a tool for deliberation and the creation of shared content. This means that the two meanings (technological/architectural, political) operate at two different levels, as one can see an *online platform* as a vehicle for a specific *political platform*. More specifically, an online platform is assimilable to any other of the parts of a traditional party organization, such as a caucus organisation, a system of local branches, a network of recreational circles; it represents at the same time their technological evolution, and their complement.

Although this is not the first time that the expression “platform politics” is found in an academic context, it has been used vaguely, and without being formally defined or operationalised, shifting between different meanings. Renzi (2011), in his academic summary of a conference titled *Platform Politics*, broadly used it to indicate any political usage of an online platform. *Platform Politics* was also a special issue of *Culture Machine* (Hands et al., 2013) which discussed the political implications of social media platforms, but did not define the concept any further. Last, Edwards (2018) used the term to discuss the political roles of platform-style websites such as YouTube, drawing from Gillespie (2010).

In contrast with this uneven practice, we define *platform politics* as:

the introduction of digital intermediaries (e.g. software applications, websites, social networking services) into the structure of political parties, to facilitate internal communication, engage in political decision-making, organize political action, and transform the overall experience of participation in political parties.

At the opposites in the application of *platform politics* we outline two different styles: open and closed. An open platform is a platform that gives users the ability to reprogram its functions by providing them all the necessary information to do so. Contrarily, in closed platforms the control over the functionalities of the platform and the information to alter these functionalities is restricted to certain individuals. From an open perspective, *platform politics* has a utopian propensity to replace the traditional functions of parties and political institutions with more decentralized, participatory ones. We argue that the type of response to the crisis of representation that parties produce by practicing *platform politics* is contingent on the openness of the online platforms they use, and based on their ethos, licensing, governance, design and informational structure, as shown in Table 1.

Ideally, open *platform politics* grant intellectual property rights for the platform, software applications, hardware, etc., to members of the party, citizens, or the public at large. Consequently, when citizens own their platforms or a broad license, the governance of a platform (including acceptable behaviour and use) becomes a shared collective responsibility. This typically involves transparent, negotiated exchanges between party leaders, members, civic technology practitioners, platform developers, etc.

Table 1
Open vs. closed platforms

Features	Questions	Open platforms	Closed platforms
Software license	<i>Who owns the platform?</i>	Open-source Collective ownership	Proprietary Individual ownership
Platform governance	<i>How is the platform governed and by who?</i>	Decentralized Transparent Shared Negotiated: – Party leaders – Party members – Citizens – Civic tech practitioners – Developers	Centralized Opaque Exclusive Non-negotiable: – Party leadership – IP rights holders
Design/UX	<i>Who is at the center of the platform design? Whose user experience is privileged?</i>	Party members	Party leaders
Information flows	<i>How is the information flow on the platform structured?</i>	Multi-directional	Top-down

In contrast, closed *platform politics* grants intellectual property rights to private individuals who then license software applications, or dispose of the use of the platform under their own terms. Closed, proprietary platforms do not share governance responsibilities with party members or other stakeholders, but gather information from members without having to produce feedback, and generally rely on rigidly structured roles.

Note that, to a certain extent, the owners of a platform always limit participation, so that openness largely depends on the platform design, i.e. the rules governing how users interact with the platform. User experience is also inscribed within the technology of the platform, rooted in the technical expertise of designers and technology developers which remains unintelligible to most users. Inscribed platform governance can add one intermediary layer of flexibility and freedom, which the more closed forms of *platform politics* lack. A platform with multiple stakeholders can focus on user experience and meaningful political participation; on the other hand, a closed platform with exclusive governance by intellectual property rights holders tends to prioritize the generation of data and analytics to inform and shape organisational or business decisions.

The governance and design of a platform are in turn responsible for shaping the structure of political participation and the flow of information. It then becomes important to observe how information is exchanged through the online platform, and particularly by whom. Open platforms are ideally pushed to cultivate top-down and bottom-up flows of information between citizens and party leaders. Contrarily, closed platforms limit exchanges to top-down information flows; citizens are recipients of party information and services, but are removed from internal decision-making.

Platform politics are appealing to movement-parties when they allow ‘the people’ to participate in shared decision-making, therefore they should privilege a platform that is tailored for rank-and-file members of the party. While not directly addressing populism in our work, we acknowledge that this language can fit within the thin ideology of the ‘good people’ against the ‘corrupt elites’ that populism proposes. In general, new, decentralized, internet-mediate parties offer an optimistic view of participation; instead of using robust party organisations to engage in collective action, citizens are directed towards the lean infrastructure of platforms. Proponents of a more developed online presence often overlook how democracy can be messy and frustrating, even when relying on technological interventions (Chadwick & May, 2003).

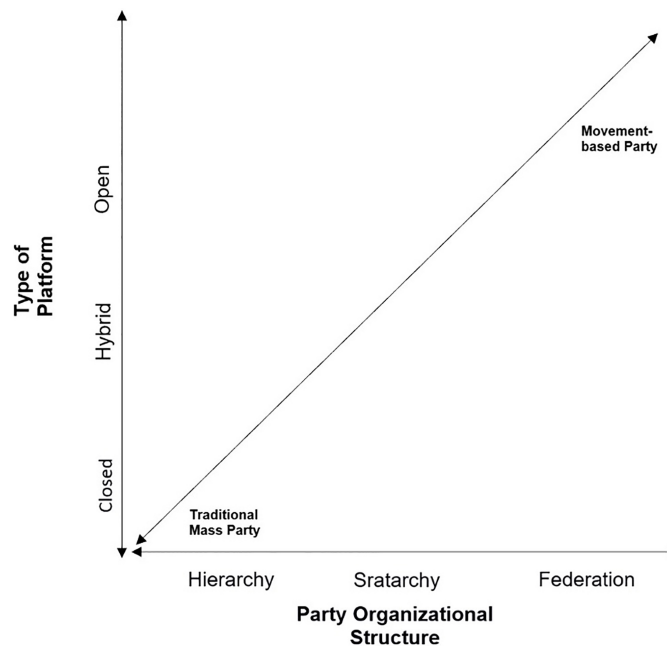


Fig. 1. An organisational model of party-based *platform politics*.

When thinking about open *platform politics*, we naturally tend to associate them with a federative organisation, where the freedom of the different souls of the party is extended to its internet branch, which then becomes another organisational layer for channelling participation. On the other side, closed *platform politics* fit well within the image of a hierarchical party organisation, where the platform serves the interest of the central party leadership and/or the parliamentary party and channels information coming from the top. This said, an important caveat lies in the fact that the theoretical correspondence between a model of party organisation and open or closed *platform politics* does not have to translate into practice, as party leaders have freedom over platform implementation.

Figure 1 shows the two aspects on the two axes of a graph, and includes the ideal positioning of an old, institutionalised mass party, and of a movement-based party at two opposite corners.

Ultimately, the adoption of open or closed *platform politics* intersects with whether the party is willing to disintermediate control over core party functions like candidate selection, agenda building, and endorsing policies. Whereas more open organisational models of traditional political parties (strataarchy, federation) capture the dynamics of decentralization, movement-parties use online platforms to engage in disintermediation. When institutionalised political parties become strataarchies, party leaders are still in charge of elaborating the political strategy of the party. In contrast, disintermediation promises to reduce or eliminate the central party organisation, leaving members and MPs as the only elements in the party.

But what happens when there is a mismatch between technology and organisation, so that the new, internet-based elements find themselves projected into a structure that they do not fit in? How has the real-life adoption of *platform politics* worked? Our research regards how these different combinations play out in practice. The next two sections consist of an explanation of our methods and of four brief case studies which aim to illustrate how different political parties are dealing with the adoption of some form of *platform politics*, given a certain pre-existing internal organisation.

4. Methods

To understand parties' use of online platforms we employed a document analysis (Bowen, 2009; O'Leary, 2014). We collected documents from the following sources:

- a) *Public records*: parties' statutes (4), and strategic plans (2).
- b) *Public documents*: parties' websites (4), social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter) (8), newspaper articles/blogposts (65).
- c) *Physical evidence*: handbooks (2), training materials related to parties' use of online platforms (4), and apps (4).

When conducting our analysis, we paid attention to the subjectivity of the source of the document and to the original purpose of the document, such as the target audience (Bowen, 2009), two biases that normally appear when employing qualitative methods (Bryman, 2006). This is particularly important when looking at internal party documents that aim to generate a positive impression of the party's technological efforts. The analysis employed in this research is an attempt to make sense of how parties' use of online platform affects the internal organization in terms of members' political participation, with a specific focus on the points of tension and contradiction emerging from the interaction of the two elements.

We expect future research to expand on our investigation by (i) studying the association between parties' centralization of decisions and their online organizational behaviour (see Esteve Del Valle & Borge, 2017); (ii) proposing a content analysis of media discourse, drawing from news outlets and focusing on parties' online platforms; or (iii) conducting interviews with party cadres and party members to gain a qualitative insight on their organizational use of ICTs.

5. Case studies

Looking for examples of *platform politics* that correspond to different combinations between technology and organisation, we opted for a two-country, four-party design including both movement-parties and institutionalised parties.

Our case selection was limited by the availability of cases, and the choice fell on two Southern European democracies frequently featured in comparative political research, Spain and Italy. In each case we selected a newer movement-based party that practices a form of internet-mediated democracy, and a large, institutionalised party of the centre-left, that has been recently in government, but is now facing a crisis of consensus. Spain's *Podemos* and Italy's *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (*Five Star Movement*, or *M5S*) are two ideal cases, as they have made *platform politics* central planks of their strategy for shaping their party brand. On the other side we picked the *PSOE* (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*) in Spain, and the *PD* (*Partito Democratico*) in Italy, both of which proposed a distinctive approach to *platform politics*.

Following the case selection, a series of preliminary comments are in order, that will then guide the case-by-case analysis. At a glance, *Podemos* and *M5S* might appear to be practicing the most open *platform politics*. Organisationally, they first appeared to the general public as shapeless, un-institutionalised political movements, chaotically coagulating to take the semblance of a party, but ready to welcome new members from all walks of life, and acting as a federation of civic circles (*Podemos*), or online and off-line *meetups* (*M5S*). Both parties played a strong emphasis on internet-mediated democracy, as an antidote against corruption and the sclerotization of establishment parties, and encouraged extensive participation.

On the other side, *PD* and *PSOE* are known to the electorate as stable, institutionalized party machines, capable of organising national campaigns and serving terms in government, with a history of discipline and organisational *hierarchy* coming from the days of mass membership and Marxist ideology. Their online presence almost came as an afterthought, as a consequence of the necessity to move with the times, and it is usually considered insufficient.

The case studies then serve to transform these initial images and create an organisational picture that responds to reality, as all four parties move towards stratarchy, albeit coming from opposite directions, and creating different challenges. On the other side, their online presence is explored to understand (1) to what extent the movement-parties' promises of openness are fulfilled in reality and if there are any components that appear instead closed; and (2) how the institutionalised parties cannot escape negotiating their online presence to open some form of intra-party democracy.

Through these four case studies, the key trade-off is that championing self-organizing publics through shared platform government, citizen-to-citizen communication flows and platform-mediated direct democracy can severely limit the power of party leaders and MPs.

5.1. *Podemos*

Podemos is the main Spanish movement-based party, the long-term political outcome of the *Indignados* movement that rose against austerity policies during the recent global recession. It has been successful electorally gathering around 21% of votes at the 2015 and 2016 Spanish general elections.

Podemos matters to the context of *platform politics* because its core is animated by a simple goal: 'to develop free technologies that would allow massive online participation' (*Podemos*' Digital Heart, 2016). To this end, *Podemos*' online platform, *Participa* ('participate'), has a GNU Affero v3 General Public License that allows anyone to access the source code and copy, modify or improve the software. This software license affirms the party's commitment to technological sovereignty: users share ownership of the platform and play a critical role to its internal governance, developing applications to improve the party's democratic political culture.

The affordances of building a platform around the principles of openness and technological sovereignty are that design features, user experience, and platform governance are continually renegotiated and improved through a transparent, ongoing conversation between developers, party leaders and citizens. *Podemos*' core idea about the role technology should play in the organization of the party and its political actions, as stated in the party statute (*Podemos*, 2018), their 'Organizational Principles'² and 'Organizational Document',³ and, of course, in *Participa*'s website.⁴

A wide array of tools for collaborative governance has made *Podemos*' organisational structure complex. While some features of *Participa* are still in the development stage, many others are available including: a mobile application for deliberation (*Appgree*), online voting, participatory budgeting, a third-party platform to circulate petitions on *Reddit*, a custom accounting tool for party finance (*OpenERP*), and a newsletter. The organisation of *Podemos* combines horizontal and vertical features; governance is localized, networked and scaled to the national level. Indeed, for *Podemos* 'the method is the message' (Blitzer, 2014). Financial and political decisions are open and transparent, and there are opportunities for

²web-podemos.s3.amazonaws.com/wordpress/wpcontent/uploads/2014/11/documento_organizativo_alta_03.pdf (Spanish: Principios Organizativos).

³<https://files.podemos.info/9AMI3us6iC.pdf> (Spanish: Documento Organizativo).

⁴<https://participa.podemos.info/es/preguntas-frecuentes>.

citizens to participate in voting and deliberation through online platforms, or in person. Elected officials are expected to be accountable to party members; all salary information and parliamentary activity is public.

Despite the ambitious scope of *Podemos*' model as a participatory, responsive and transparent party, some have decried these efforts as 'window-dressing'. As Rendueles and Sola (2015) put it, 'the use of open votes, can often feign democracy while concentrating power in the formal party leadership'. *Podemos*'s most recognizable leader, the Secretary General Pablo Iglesias, is a political science professor from Madrid, whose message in plain-spoken language has gained popularity during frequent TV appearances. Some have accused *Podemos* of 'Caesarism', pointing out how everything the secretary wants is granted and the party 'put[s] on a show of constant internal consultations, on already decided matters' (Garzón, 2015). In addition, it is worthy to remember *Podemos*' platform has come across problems with the census of registered members. It seems that massive processes of online affiliation usually put to the test digital platforms when they start to function. Last, the structure that was ultimately adopted at the first Citizens' Assembly was rather conventional, all of which makes *Podemos*' organization on the ground closer to a stratarchy than to a federation.

Such criticisms reveal the organisational challenge of *platform politics* for movement parties: incorporating the rhetoric and the tools is easy, but relinquishing control over candidate selection and policy programs requires faith in an amorphous membership. So far, it has proved easier to democratize the party activity online than it has been on the ground. In the case of *Podemos*, the leadership appears to retain a significant degree of power to hedge against the decentralization of intra-party governance. There is actually a website *quehacenlosdiputados.net* (*whatdoMPsdo?*) to explain what elected officials are doing; ironically, it does not yet contain the promised information. Furthermore, instead of expanding the decision-making processes happening in 'Plaza Podemos', a subreddit (*r/podemos*) which transformed into a broad space for online deliberation (*plaza.podemos.info*), *Participa* serves mainly as a tool for the party leaders' consultations, offering a more closed model of *platform politics*.

One can argue that a certain degree of leadership is necessary to any organisation, but what matters here is the disconnection between party members' expectations and the reality of institutionalised politics.

5.2. PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*)

Despite an established electoral base and 140 years of history, the *Spanish Socialist Workers' Party* (PSOE), has recently lost support in Spanish parliamentary elections, seeing its vote share in legislative elections dramatically fall from 43.9% in 2008, to 22.6% in 2016. One of PSOE's responses to this crisis of consensus, was to reinforce its online presence to show the electorate that it can meet pressures for more responsiveness and reform. The adoption of this approach is reflected in the strategic role that new computer-mediated forms of participation play in its internal organization, as stated in the party's statutes (PSOE, 2017) and documents concerning its organization, like the *Federal Regulation Developing the Federal Statutes*⁵ (PSOE, 2017).

PSOE's approach to internet politics was put into practice through the creation of the online platform *miPSOE*, promising members a direct voice in the decisions of the party. The platform is restricted to members of the party who must register, provide personal identification and be approved. They are then offered an opportunity to participate in debates, propose policy ideas, take polls, provide suggestions

⁵Spanish: 'Reglamento Federal de Desarrollo de los Estatutos Federales'.

to the party, and join local party affiliates. *PSOE* has experienced significant challenges in using its platform to consult rank-and-file members and share authority in party governance.

In the aftermath of the Spanish parliamentary elections of 2015, *PSOE*'s leader Pedro Sánchez, used the party's online platform to put to a vote a possible coalition agreement with the centre-right party *Ciudadanos*. Members of the party were given 8 days to register on the *miPSOE* website (*PSOE Consulta*, 2016), and then they could vote online over two days, or in person at polling locations. The party collaborated with the technology company *Add4u* to verify online voters' identities, protect the security of the vote, anonymize voting and make the entire system auditable. Despite the party's efforts, from a total of 189,167 militants who could vote online, only 13,697 used that method.⁶ While the pact was narrowly approved, the agreement ultimately unravelled, leading to new elections in June 2016.

Throughout the process, there were concerns about how the leadership had structured the online vote. Voters were only given two options regarding the pact: 'yes' or 'no', with little debate about the terms, or who would serve as Prime Minister in case it was approved and electorally successful. This example shows how stratcheries can practice a form of *platform politics* that limits supporters' participatory autonomy by narrowly constraining choice.

PSOE's recent history also reveals some, perhaps more trivial, but nevertheless crucial, challenges of *platform politics*. There have been problems with members' registration concerning how members choose to enter the party; some members have been able to register on *miPSOE* as direct affiliates at the federal level without joining a municipal or district group, but others who wanted to participate through a local party organisation have had difficulty registering on the platform (Romero, 2017). Technical deployment problems can undermine the public's confidence in the use of online platforms and in the overall assessment of the party's technological competence. *PSOE*'s growing pains with online politics indicate that, in spite of efforts made to show that the party takes the concerns of its members seriously, the use of platforms to enhance the voice of members in the party's strategic decisions creates logistical and technical challenges.

As previously mentioned, stratcheries may face significant pressure to reform because of increasing electoral competition; their continued electoral success depends on showing responsiveness to public demands. Our claim is therefore that the adoption of some form of *platform politics* could have made a much more positive difference for the *PSOE*. The problems encountered in the implementation of the new tools might have emerged from the fact that the party embraced technology as a last resort when facing crisis, but without any radical change in its organisation on the ground and in its message to the public.

5.3. *M5S (Movimento Cinque Stelle)*

The emergence of the *Five Star Movement* on the national political scene of Italy had been prepared since the early 2000s through the bold ideological statements in Beppe Grillo's satirical shows. It was launched in 2009, as a political movement proposing a five-pronged policy agenda based on free water, environment, internet connectivity, development and improved transportation. In parallel, the movement's ideologue Gianroberto Casaleggio, preached a form of internet-based direct democracy where members control the stream of information and the policy processes (Floridia & Vignati, 2014). It promised a radical transformation of traditional party politics through disintermediation, with party representatives merely acting as spokespeople for the membership base.

⁶<http://www.europapress.es/nacional/noticia-75-militantes-psoe-apoyan-acuerdo-ciudadanos-70-consulta-escrutado-2016-0227212206.html>.

As a movement-based party *M5S* was incredibly successful, gathering a stunning 25% of votes in the 2014 Italian general elections, and reaching 32.2% in 2018, which gave it access to government, and dramatically raised the stakes of the whole experiment. As a political formation lacking any previous institutional experience, *M5S* initially adopted an uneven and improvised kind of organisation. Vignati (2015) compared *M5S*'s structure to different models, including Carty's *franchise*, showing how its lean infrastructure created a different-looking party in different localities. Its shape depends on its local electoral success, and on the presence of a national party manager, resulting in geographical variations between stratarchy and federation.

A telling example of its *modus operandi* comes from the *M5S*'s first foray into local government. The appointment of Federico Pizzarotti as the mayor of Parma in 2012, was hailed as an epochal change, but his de-alignment with the leadership in 2016 resulted in his sacking from the party.⁷ This shows how, despite the relative degree of freedom of the local party, the leadership always has the last word, as all members are exposed to non-arguable sanctions from above.

As for *M5S*'s online presence, its platform was launched in April 2016, called *Rousseau* to convey and image of trust in human nature and democracy. It was initially used to hold votes on the party programme (or '*non-statute*'), a code of conduct for MPs and EuroParliament-MPs, and on the party's energy policy agenda, establishing an all-time record for online participation with over 80,000 voters.⁸ A series of similar votes followed, all with the same characteristics: little explanation given on *M5S*' blog, and almost nobody voting against the proposals, making them basically online plebiscites. In only a few months participation fell under 20,000 members. In the leadership election of September 2017 the national leader Luigi Di Maio easily prevailed, as all the other candidates were unknown to the general public;⁹ participation was under 40,000 members.

At a glance, *Rousseau* looks both more open and more closed than *Participa*. For example, *Rousseau*'s source code is based on a proprietary content management system and is not publicly available (Deseriis, 2017). On the other side, some features on the platform target people with no prior political experience through a number of peer-mentoring tools that train members on how to participate and to run for office (ibid.). Registered members can introduce, amend and comment on legislative proposals online, but selection criteria are unclear and results limited. For instance, in September 2016 the party announced that two of the legislative proposals drafted on *Rousseau* would be discussed in Parliament, a very small fraction out of a total of 193. Therefore, like *Podemos*, *M5S* has been accused of using its online platform to create the appearance of direct democracy while engaging in *cybercratic centralism*, as a technologically savvy organisation 'with strong internal discipline and a centralization of all steering functions.' (De Rosa, 2013).

The lack of a national congress has also made it hard to coordinate the party line, and *M5S*'s new officeholders have made mistakes because of their inexperience. Even if more open *platform politics* lead to more responsive party leadership, they do not automatically produce competent MPs, and listening to amorphous crowds online cannot replace the value of expertise. An internal response towards party discipline has been triggered by the positive performance of the party in the 2018 elections: all MPs signed a new code of conduct that further limits their personal freedom and increases the powers of the leadership.

⁷http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2016/05/pizzarotti_sospeso_dal_movimento_5_stelle.html.

⁸http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2016/10/risultati_delle_votazioni_sul_non_statuto_e_il_regolamento_del_movimento_5_stelle.html.

⁹http://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2017/09/il_candidato_premier_del_movimento_5_stelle_i_candidati.html.

We believe that the *M5S*'s move towards stratarchy while maintaining a relatively open style of platform politics might result in a loss of identity and damage the party brand (Enyedi, 2014). Given the high expectations set by its technological infrastructure, and how internal party openness depends on *Rousseau*, *M5S* risks to soon appear homologated to traditional political parties and as 'false prophet' of direct democracy.

5.4. PD (*Partito Democratico*)

Founded in October 2007 as the latest reincarnation of the formerly Marxist mass party *PCI-PDS-DS*, Italy's *Partito Democratico* (*PD*), has been subject to a number of internal transformations in its eleven years of life. To mark a discontinuity with traditional Italian party politics the new party adopted primary elections for leadership at all levels, which triggered unforeseen consequences. Five primary elections for party secretary have since then taken place in the *PD*, the last two won by former Florence mayor Matteo Renzi, whose rise as an outsider with limited political experience, is key to this recent transformation.

Renzi, a practicing Catholic, was the first leader not coming from the clique who had received its formation through the *PCI*, the *Italian Communist Party* (Guidi, 2015). Through a media campaign that presented him as close to the people (Ciaglia & Mazzoni, 2015), and as the *demolition man* of old politics, Renzi propelled himself to national-level notoriety in the 2012 primaries, and won the following leadership election in 2013, following Pierluigi Bersani's resignation. He then moved on to make *PD*'s ideological appeal wide, following the tradition of both the Italian centre and left, drawing equal inspiration from Antonio Gramsci and Aldo Moro.

PD's permanence in government between 2013 and 2018 under a young and moderate leader, had opened the question of whether the party would adopt a modern online branch, and on March 10, 2017, Renzi boosted as an epochal change the upcoming introduction of an online platform. Its launch came together with the new online newspaper *Democratica*, which replaced the historical *L'Unità*, on March 30; the platform was named *Bob* in honour of the late Robert Kennedy, one of Italy's most esteemed foreign political figures. It promised to open the party to a broader base, and quickly catch up with political formations with a stronger online presence. Coherently, *Bob*'s website reads '*A door open to everyone. A unique digital ecosystem, inclusive, collaborative. To be a protagonist of history*'.¹⁰ It claims to promote transparency and go against a style of internet-based politics based on fake news and false publicity.

On the other side, as a political magazine commented,¹¹ *Bob* is a 'complete disaster' as a participatory tool. *Bob*'s platform is proprietary, and the information flow is mainly top-down, with no space for user-generated content, and its software is full of technical bugs. The amount of functionalities available is scarce, limited to the presentation of selected issues from *Democratica* promoted by the party leadership, plus an instrument for polling users, and a '*proposals*' section that only contains a form where the user can contact the party staff. Oddly, and in contrast with *Rousseau*, *MiPSOE* and *Participa*, access to *Bob* does not require party membership, but only an affirmative answer to the question '*Do you accept the values' charter and intend to vote for PD?*' Discursively, one can find strong references to participative democracy, but in practice the platform is just a vehicle for top-down information flows.

¹⁰<https://app.partitodemocratico.it/> (Italian 'Una porta aperta a tutti. Un ecosistema digitale unico, inclusivo, collaborativo. Per essere protagonista della storia.').

¹¹<http://espresso.repubblica.it/visioni/tecnologia/2017/05/31/news/abbiamo-provato-bob-la-nuova-app-del-partito-democratici-co-ed-e-un-disastro-totale-1.302960>.

Contrary to what happened for *Rousseau*, the amount of media coverage dedicated to *Bob* after its launch has been limited, and the platform has been updated only once since, in early June 2017. As elections were approaching in early 2018, all talk about the app had disappeared from the official press releases of the party, and the use of *Bob* remained limited. The only section that is constantly updated contains a daily video with commentary of the political press. The disconnect between the extent of openness shown through primary elections, and the limitations of their online offer is striking: the use of a closed platform open to anybody does not seem able to contribute to internal party democratization.

In the March 2018 election a *PD*-led coalition became the third political bloc in the country, with 22.9% of votes, 7% less than in 2013. While this political defeat cannot be blamed on the failure of their online platform, this could be the right occasion for the adoption of more open *platform politics*, as a strong internet presence might counterbalance the loss of identity due to the party's ideological transformation.

6. Discussion and conclusion

Overall, movement-parties like *Podemos* and *M5S* distinguish themselves from institutionalised parties not only by adopting a more horizontal organisational structure, but also by practicing a more open form of *platform politics*. Yet, despite the perceived value of inclusive decision-making, movement-party leaders are reluctant to fully decentralize control of the party. Both example of movement-based party that we examined embody an eclectic mix of organisational features that straddle the line between stratarchy and federation. Differences are also present, since the *M5S* leadership seems to exercise a tighter control over its elected representatives than *Podemos*' lean structure, while the level of decisional power accorded to the internet members seems to be higher in the Italian movement, even if votes have tended to be plebiscitary. Moving forward, the challenge for these parties resides in how to institutionalize party organization without losing internal democracy both on the ground and online, as in case of failure the sanctions from the electorate might be severe.

As for the two more institutionalised parties, *PSOE*'s more open approach places it ahead in its development of credible platform politics than the more streamlined product offered by the Italian *PD* with its app *Bob*. Both have developed platforms to facilitate internal organisational changes that wrestle power from party leaders and put it in the hands of rank-and-file members. Institutionalised parties are still able to exploit members' low expectations regarding their internet-based tools, and do not seem to face additional sanctions at the moment, although the limited use of *platform politics* has certainly not helped them navigate their electoral crisis. However, the situation might change in the next few years, as non-technological cohorts are replaced by cohorts of digital natives whose political socialization happens largely on the internet, and for whom the existence of movement-parties is natural.

Figure 2 shows the movement parties (*Podemos* and *M5S*) and the institutionalised parties (*PSOE* and *PD*) in their responsiveness to techno-political changes in line with their party organisation structure (x-axis) and the type of *platform politics* (y-axis) that they have followed. Going forward, a spatial analysis might be the best way to assess the difference between different formations, through the elaboration of appropriate metrics.

To understand how techno-political changes are affecting party dynamics, we need to consider how parties adapt organisationally to demands for more citizen participation. We argue that embracing online platforms to involve party members in internal decisions and organize collective action, what we call *platform politics*, is one type of response to the crisis of representation. We have developed a framework

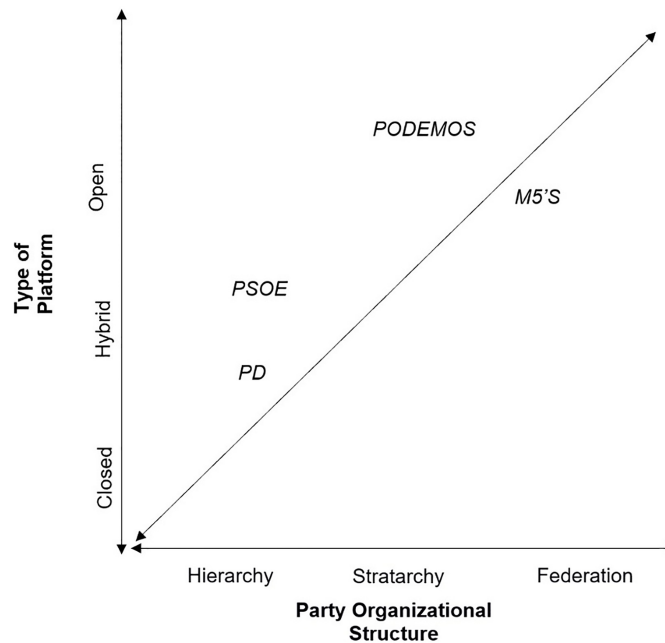


Fig. 2. Position of *Podemos*, *M5S*, *PSOE* and *PD* in the organisational model of party-based *platform politics*.

to show that parties that coexist in the same party systems, but are at two opposite stages of institutionalisation, can practice *platform politics* to consolidate control over citizen participation within the party, or to make participation more inclusive and meaningful for rank-and-file party members.

We suggest that *platform politics* have been particularly attractive for movement-parties, that implement shared decisional authority over the direction of the party, amidst frustration with establishment parties that lack internal democracy. Generally, parties have been experimenting with hybrid organisational models, centralizing some core functions to party leaders, but de-localizing other decisions. We also observed these parties' adoption of open and closed *platform politics*, with some tightly structured forms of citizen engagement, while opening up other channels for participation. Embracing *platform politics* can satisfy members' demands for more engagement and representation, but also comes with a series of new challenges for parties.

This is especially evident in the slippage that takes place between the positive language used by parties in the internal documents and blog posts that describe their platform. During our analysis a series of details emerged, that show the internal contradictions in the adoption of the new tools. In Italy it can be seen, for the *PD*, in its general lack of internet proficiency, to the point of having programming errors in the platform; while for *M5S* it can be seen, for example, in the limited participation of the membership base in a series of online votes, which collides with their claims of extreme openness. On the other side in Spain, *Podemos* has arguably been the most successful of the four, but has not escaped accusations of centralism, while *PSOE*'s had to face challenges of technological and ideological nature in its early forays into *platform politics*, resulting in limited participation.

Moving forward, we propose several questions that are relevant to future studies of *platform politics*. The first concerns demographics: are the people who use parties' online platforms different from traditional activists? If there are differences, how do parties weigh deliberations made through online platforms against forms of offline decision-making? Surveys can help us develop a demographic profile

of a party's platform users, and see whether they constitute a cohesive constituency that can be targeted through different kinds of involvement techniques.

We would also like to know, since parties adopt *platform politics* to appeal to voters, are these efforts to expand online participation rewarded with electoral success? Do parties perform better at the polls when they rely on platforms to decide candidate lists and coordinate mobilization strategies? The evidence offered by this paper shows that this might be the case, but it refers to a small sample of cases over a short period of time. Furthermore, comparing the electoral success of parties that practice open or closed *platform politics* can provide insights about how voters evaluate promises of internal party democracy.

The relationship of a party's ideology to its use of platforms also warrants further study. Parties like *M5S* offer the scaffolding of a lean party program, but claim to represent citizens on the left and the right. Does a vague ideological commitment determine electoral success or does ideology get in the way once the online organization reaches a certain size? Further, can a form of partisan *platform politics* be adopted successfully on the fringes of the political spectrum? These questions will probably be best answered once the adoption of *platform politics* becomes more widespread across European party systems, but it would be important to offer an assessment based on the current situation.

Last, and going beyond electoral strategy, when online platforms play a larger role in parties' interactions with members, but are also susceptible to cyberattacks, how are parties keeping them secure? How must parties respond to trolls, hate speech and threats of violence that we observe daily on social media such as Twitter or Facebook? Answering these questions will require placing these challenges into context and comparing the strategic responses of political parties to other institutions that use online platforms for organizing politics.

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